

Title:

Wohpe at the Y: Ella Deloria Domesticates the Lakota Goddess-like Wohpe for Christian Children

Grade Level:

College students at senior, post bac or graduate levels

Theme:

Constraints facing an indigenous (Dakota) writer in producing an acceptable version of a significant Lakota cosmological and historical figure (Wohpe/White Buffalo Woman) for a YW/YMCA summer camp in 1928

Duration:

Two or three class sessions (1 hour and 15 minutes each)

Goal:

To introduce students to the challenges and compromises of “translating” collected and printed traditional oral stories into non-Native forms for non-Native audiences

Objectives:

Students will learn differences between oral and literate rhetoric; to understand variants of a canonical sacred story; to appreciate risks and pitfalls affecting the modern storyteller’s version of a story

Standard:

Teaching in accordance with the Univ. of North Carolina English Department’s 2009 statement on diversity:

“The English Department strives to create an academic climate that respects people of varied cultural backgrounds and life experiences. As a community of scholars and teachers who study language, literature and writing, we are committed to nurturing intellectual and aesthetic diversity. In all our activities, we invite participation by diverse groups, including, but not limited to, those who define themselves in the following terms: race and ethnicity; gender; political orientation; sexual orientation; special health needs; age; religion; country of origin; and socio-economic status. Finally, by fostering multiple perspectives in our coursework, we can help our students prepare to participate in our increasingly diverse society, as well as in the global community.”

Cultural Concept:

“Children’s Literature” is a Western genre, rather than a universal one.

Cultural Background:

Traditional Native North American Indian societies, in their oral storytelling (dating back at least 30,000 years), had little concept of what we call “children’s literature” which, interestingly, is defined by its audience: the “protected class” of modern childhood in the Western world. Traditional Native American conceptions of “the self” locate its origins in

ancestral time out of mind; children are sacred, the ancestors reborn; the notion of an "individual" attains significance as a function of kinship placement and membership in a prior and over-arching social whole, the People. Moreover, in the world's non-Western, traditional societies, it was assumed that understanding the stories grew with age; endings did not have to be happy. Nor were certain subjects taboo, and oral narrative/storytelling was **the** means by which cultures preserved their memory, history, knowledge, wisdom. As one elder has said, "We are Indian people because we tell each other Indian stories."

In the later nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, when assimilation and forced deculturation within government and church-run boarding schools were federal policy after the confinement of Native Americans to reservations, an unforeseen effect of suppressing Native languages and cultural practices was the development of pan-Indian commonalities and a nascent literature in a new, shared language: English. One way to address a mainstream audience, nineteenth century Indian writers discovered, was via "children's literature." The entrée of American Indian-authored stories into the Euroamerican literary mainstream was thus by dint of their infantilization: (Salishan) Mourning Dove's *Coyote Stories* sanitized the great Trickster; (Dakota) Charles Eastman and his Euramerican wife Elaine Eastman's *Wigwam Evenings* domesticated traditional narrative; one of (Mohawk) performing artist E. Pauline Johnson's audiences was mass-circulation magazines for children and their parents.

During the same time period, English-born artist Ernest Thompson Seton started the Woodland Indian societies for Canadian and American white male youth. In England, the Boy Scouts (founded in 1908) and the Girl Guides (1910) were negligibly influenced by Seton's model, but in North America *The Boy Scout Handbook* evolved from Seton's *The Birch-bark Roll of the Woodland Indians*. This imitative trend survives in YMCA summer camps where children acquire "Indian" names, "clan" affiliations, and survival skills. However honorable the values taught, such children are only playing at being Indians, during "down" time. In the boarding schools, American Indian children were not playing at being white. They had no choice in the matter. Nonetheless, early Dakota/Lakota intellectuals and performers, with so many avenues of communication with the mainstream culture closed to them, were willing to work for organizations such as the Boy Scouts (Eastman) and Girl Scouts; the Camp Fire Girls (Ella Deloria); the Young Men's and Women's Christian Associations (Eastman, Deloria), and various summer "camps" (Rosebud Yellow Robe). They became cultural mediators, promising "authentic" representations and explanations of rituals, ceremonies, and values of their Dakota/Lakota cultures of origin.

Student Activities:

Before (or during) the first class session, students will free-write on the topic, "What I know for certain about American Indians." As a group facilitated by the instructor, we will observe any commonalities in the responses and identify misinformation and stereotyping. One of the required texts, used throughout the course, will be Devon Mihesuah's (Choctaw) *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities*.

Because many courses at UNCC have doubled (or more) in size due to a 16.2% NC state budget cut in 2011, it is difficult to conduct group work in classrooms that are now

cramped (40 students in a space designed for 25, for example). We will therefore delegate group discussion work to Google Docs. At first glance this appears to be a loss of personal and group interaction, but a pilot in spring 2011 indicated that the opposite proved to be true: students could not waste time bemoaning a chemistry test or the large amount of reading in a British literature survey course; the instructor could fully participate in each group's discussion rather than gravitating among them; students had to contribute at least twice; the percentage of the final grade increased to 25%; students have a week-10 days to complete each topic. Example: Why do you think Deloria concentrated only on Wohpe, with no mention of White Buffalo Woman?" "Why did she introduce a spurious (re)naming ceremony?" "How does she describe the old 'pagan' religion?" "When she introduces an early part of the Sun Dance ceremony, why does she stop there?"

Students will also submit microthemes electronically to the instructor. These concern analysis of the resources provided (see below), and are limited to 650 words, +/- 10%. Example: "How is Deloria's rhetoric in the Wohpe festival influenced by Christian references? "

As a course community final project, students, in conjunction with the International English Honor Society, Sigma Tau Delta, will hold a book sale over several days, the profits donated to a tribal college or university to include all national award-winning children's books by Am. Indian authors. (These may be located at <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.net> or www.oyate.org.)

Resources:

All of these are available online or in the university library. Criteria for evaluating children's books about Am. Indians in children's books (including by non-Native authors) are at www.oyate.org. The Am. Indian Library Association is another valuable resource. Students will also learn how to evaluate websites concerning Am. Indians in general, and one of their essays will analyze sources that purport to be authentic but are not.

"The Wohpe Festival" is available online via Google. But permission to print it or quote from it must be obtained from Philip J. Deloria, pdeloria@umich.edu .

Numbers of books and articles, by anthropologists and literary critics, have collected versions of Wohpe's role in the mythological Lakota creation narrative, as well as her iteration, in historical time, to White Buffalo Woman. In modern New Age narratives, Wohpe/White Buffalo Woman have been appropriated for profit and based on corrupt information, including making up non-existent rituals ("Brooke Medicine Eagle's" *Buffalo Woman Comes Singing*; Paul Goble's *Buffalo Woman*, which is complete fabrication). Below is a limited sample of the credible literature:

Jahner, Elaine A. "Transitional Narratives and Cultural Continuity." Kroeber, Karl, ed. *American Indian Persistence and Resurgence*. Duke Univ. Press: 1994: 149-80.

Powers, Marla N. *Oglala Women: Myth, Ritual and Reality*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986.

Powers, William K. *Oglala Religion*. Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975.

Walker, James R. *Lakota Belief and Ritual*. Ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner. Univ. of Nebraska Press in cooperation with the Colorado Historical Society, 1980.

Walker, James R. *Lakota Myth*. Ed. Elaine A. Jahner. Univ. of Nebraska Press: 1983.

Students will compile an annotated webography of X further sources, following a rubric provided by the instructor on Evaluating Internet Research Resources.